DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 355 510 CS 213 607

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TITLE Freedom and Restrictions in Language Use.
PUB DATE Oct 92
NOTE 30p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Historical Materials (060)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Freedom; *Censorship; *Civil Rights; Democracy; Elementary Secondary Education; *Freedom of Speech; Higher Education; Language Attitudes; *Language Usage; Public Education; Social Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS *First Amendment; Historical Background; *Politically Correct Communication; Profanity

ABSTRACT

Since freedom of thought and expression is essential in a democracy, censorship of language is rightly regarded as a threat to all other freedoms. Still, it is inevitable that certain restrictions will occasionally be imposed on language in America and in other societies. Restrictions on language date back to the Ten Commandments, which condemned both the wrongful use of the Lord's name and the giving of false evidence, and since then penalties for different kinds of utterance have varied widely. Profane language, for example, has often been penalized, but standards of taste change dramatically over time. Victorian social decency required the use of euphemisms for body parts and functions, and works of literature were edited to exclude words regarded as improper. Often new words were coined and became commonly used as euphemisms for such words. Despite these restrictions, epithets for ethnic and racial groups were common and socially acceptable. The origins of derogatory names for various ethnic groups have long and dynamic histories. Today, society is very sensitive to the use of these terms, as illustrated by recent social events and controversies. Simultaneously, the American public generally has become decreasingly sensitive to obscene or profane language. Many school systems are drafting and passing resolutions limiting racial, ethnic, or gender-related slurs. Public figures who dismiss such politically correct sensitivity find themselves the objects of wrath and chastisement. In the end, society must guard against restrictions that interfere with the free flow of ideas that are essential to the health and existence of a democratic society. (HB)

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FREEDOM AND RESTRICTIONS IN LANGUAGE USE

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October 1992

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Because freedom of thought and expression is essential in a democracy, censorship of language is rightly regarded as a threat to all other freedoms. Freedom of speech is truly the cornerstone of a democratic society, but absolute freedom of the individual is incompatible with the basic concept of an organized society. When the interests and desires of individual members of society come in conflict with those of other members or the group as a whole, then the larger society imposes restrictions. Since language underlies or impinges on practically every aspect of human experience, it is inevitable that certain restrictions will from time to time be imposed on the language we use.

The restrictions society places on language use may be considered under two broad categories: restrictions that have the force of law, and restrictions that have the force of social disapproval. The areas of endeavor in which language is restricted vary, but they usually include religion, and they often include biological functions and social relationships. The

language thus restricted can be classified variously as profanity, obscenity and vulgarity, and insults and falsehoods.

Two of the Ten Commandments given in Exodus 22 are concerned with restrictions on language: "You shall not make wrong use of the name of the Lord your God" (v. 7), and "You shall not give false evidence against your neighbor" (v. 16). These restrictions are subsequently expanded: "You shall not revile God, nor curse a chief of your own people" (v. 28), and "You shall not spread a baseless rumor. You shall not make common cause with a wicked man by giving malicious evidence" (23.1). Twentieth century secular laws against slander, libel, and perjury impose similar restrictions in our society. Among the ancient Hebrews, fear of using God's name in vain led to their avoiding entirely the utterance of the sacred name. The penalty for reviling God (blasphemy) was death by stoning, and the only sin Jesus pronounced unforgivable was slander spoken against the Holy Spirit (Matthew 12:31-32).

Since Biblical times penalties for profane or blasphemous utterances have varied greatly in their severity. Rawson (1989) quotes from a summary of Spanish laws issued in New Orleans in 1769 as follows: "He who shall revile our Savior or His Mother the Holy Virgin Mary, shall have his tongue cut out, and his property shall be confiscated, applicable one-half to the public treasury and the other half to the informer" (p.7). He cites another law less general in scope and less severe in penalty which was passed by Parliament in 1606, making it a crime "for anyone in any theatrical production to jestingly or profanely speak or use the Holy name of God, or of Christ Jesus, or of the Holy Ghost, or of the Trinity, which are not to be spoken but with fear and reverence" (p.5). The penalty for violation of this law was a fine of ten pounds. Similarly restricting profanity, as well as obscenity, was a clause in the Hollywood Production Code of 1930: "Pointed profanity (this includes the words God, Lord, Jesus Christ--unless used reverently--hell, s.o.b., damn, Gawd), or every other profane or

vulgar expression, however used, is forbidden" (p. 5). Another specific restriction on the use of profane language cited by Rawson is George Washington's General Order to the Continental Army of July 1776: "The General is sorry to be informed that the foolish and wicked practice of profane cursing and swearing, a vice hitherto little known in an American army is growing into fashion. He hopes the officers will, by example as well as influence, endeavor to check it, and that both they and the men will reflect that we can have little hope of the blessing of Heaven on our arms if we insult it by our impiety and folly" (pp.5-6).

While the severity of penalties for irreverent language has been greatly diminished in English-speaking societies, strict penalties are still enforced in some parts of the world. A current example is the reaction of some Islamic leaders to Salman Rushdie's Satanic Verses, which they regard as profanely insulting to their religion. Rushdie has so far avoided having

the death penalty carried out by going into hiding, but some of his translators have been less fortunate.

The tendency to use profane language seems to be well established as a part of human behavior, and it manifests itself in various ways. What Robertson and Cassidy (1954) call "minced forms" result "when the human impulse to swear is held in check by religious or social prohibitions" (p.248). These minced forms of words or phrases suggest the forbidden item rather than state it outright. Gad is substituted for God, darn for damn, and dodburned for God-damned. Examples of further distortions of the sacred name are goodness, gosh, gorry, Godfrey, and golly. "Jesus is suggested by the Elizabethan Gis (now Jeez), and by the modern Gee Whiz, Jerusalem, and 'for Pete's sake'; Christ is alluded to in cripes,'for the love of Mike,' the otherwise meaningless 'O for crying out loud'; Jiminy Crickets and the more recent Jeepers Creepers attempt to combine the two. A curious exhibition indeed, of the human desire to sin combined with a want of courage" (p. 248).

While the use of profane language has long been severely restricted, it was only in relatively recent times that obscene and vulgar language became a matter of great public concern among speakers of English. Rawson (1989) points out the fact that "neither England nor the United States had any anti-obscenity statutes until the nineteenth century, when improvements in public education combined with developments in printing technology to create a popular demand for the kind of literary works that previously had circulated without restriction among society's elite" (p.7). Before the development of mass production printing, books were too expensive for people of ordinary means, and the reading public was composed mainly of those who were economically privileged. Although various forms of censorship affected religion and politics, people were allowed considerable latitude in setting their own standards of decency in language use.

With wider dissemination of books, certain kinds of material came to be regarded as a threat to public morals. In 1708, a

printer named James Read was arrested for having published The Fifteen Plagues of a Maidenhead. According to Rawson, the judge dismissed the indictment, finding that the work did indeed tend "to the corruption of good manners," but that there was no law to punish its publisher (p. 7). Subsequently, judges began to take a sterner view of such offenses, and a printer named John Wilkes was put in jail for publishing An Essay on Women in 1763. It is possible that his sentence might have been less severe if he had not also been accused of certain political offenses.

While standards of decency in language may not have caused much public concern before the nineteenth century, it does not follow that there were no restraints. Over the centuries, many Christian believers have been influenced by the Apostle Paul's admonition in his letter to the Ephesians (4:29): "No bad language must pass your lips, but only what is good and helpful to the occasion, so that it brings a blessing to those who hear it." The Wesleyan revival of religion in the eighteenth century increased public awareness of Biblical standards of conduct and

contributed to the development of a more clearly defined sense of middle-class morality.

Incidentally, a comparison of translations of the Bible itself illustrates the fact that what is regarded as vulgar language varies over time: the King James version includes the words dung, piss, and whore, which in later times were on the prohibited list.

The fact that standards of taste in the use of language change over time is further illustrated in a letter written by Sir Walter Scott (cited in Rawson, 1989). Scott relates how his grand-aunt had asked him in the 1790s to procure for her some books by Alphra Behn, which she remembered from her youth. Scott told her he did not think she would approve of "either the manners, or the language, which approached too near that of Charles II's time to be quite proper reading." Having reluctantly complied with his grand-aunt's request, Scott reported:

> The next time I saw her afterwards, she gave me back Alphra, properly wrapped up, with nearly these words: "Take back your bonny Mrs. Behn, and if you will take my advice, put her in the fire, for I have found it impossible to get through the very first novel. But is it not," she added, "a very odd thing that I, an old woman of eighty and upwards, sitting alone, feel ashamed to read a book which sixty years ago, I have heard read aloud for the amusement of large circles, consisting of the finest and most credible society of London?" (pp. 9-10)

Efforts to eliminate vulgarity in language in the early nineteenth century are seen in Henrietta and Thomas Bowdler's Family Shakespeare, published in 1807, and in Noah Webster's edition of the Bible, published in 1833. Both works substituted words for those that had come to be regarded as offensive. Organized group efforts to stamp out obscenity were made by the Boston Watch and Ward Society, the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, and in England, the Organization for the Reformation of Manners. These groups initiated private suits charging obscenity and indecency under the common law and worked

for formal statutes to require government enforcement of their moral standards.

Efforts to criminalize "indecent" materials resulted in the Obscene Publications Act of 1857 in Great Britain, and the Comstock Postal Act of 1873 in the United States. Rigorous enforcement of these laws went so far as to inhibit the use of certain words even in scholarly works and to exclude them from dictionaries. Concerning the Comstock Act, Mencken (1963) says, "Once that amazing law was upon the statute books and Comstock himself was given the inquisitorial powers of a post-office inspector, it became positively dangerous to print certain ancient and essentially decent English words" (p. 358). Partridge (1961) notes that a four-letter word for the female pudendum in one form or another dates from the Middle English period. He substitutes an asterisk for a vowel in his spelling of the word and notes that "owing to its powerful sexuality, the term has since C. 15, been avoided in written and spoken English" (p. 198). Partridge goes on to say: "Had the late Sir James

Murray courageously included the word, and spelt it in full, in the great O(xford), E(nglish) D(ictionary), the situation would be different; as it is, neither the Universal Dict(ionary) of English (1937) nor the S(horter) O(xford) D(ictionary) (1933) had the courage to include it" (p. 198). Partridge also omits the vowel from the word denoting "an act of sexual connexion." Both of these words spelled in full are included in several recently published dictionaries.

Victorian social delicacy required the use of many euphemisms for parts and functions of the human body. Various ways of avoiding Anglo-Saxon words referring to sexual union and the organs involved had already been developed, but the need to substitute bosom and stomach for breast and belly, for example, is associated with Victorian sensibility. Such delicacy of expression extended beyond references to the human body. Pieces of chicken were referred to as drum sticks and white meat instead of legs and breasts.

Euphemism was sometimes far reaching in its application to established words. Cock came to have such strong sexual overtones that the name of the barnyard fowl was changed to rooster, and cockroaches became simply roaches. Other words that contained syllables sounding like the offending word were replaced. Rawson (p. 85) gives as examples haystacks and weather vanes as replacements for haycocks and weather cocks. Extending even further, bull was another term that was avoided because of its sexual potency. Substitutes included cow brute, cow critter, top cow, and seed ox. Other words with varying degrees of proximity to taboo topics were also changed. Harlot, a synonym for the harsher word whore, became fallen woman; stockings became hose; and arse became backside or seat. Ass, homonymous with arse, was replaced by donkey or jack. Excretory functions were performed under the guise of washing one's hands or excusing oneself; and the place where these functions were performed was known variously as the privy, water closet (W.C.), toilet,

bathroom, and various other names as the substitutes themselves became "soiled" with use.

Some of the laws passed in the Victorian era are still on the statute books. The state of Georgia passed a law in 1865, which was re-enacted in 1983 (State Law 16-11-39-2), prohibiting the use of "obscene, vulgar or profane language" in the presence of anyone under fourteen years of age, if such language threatens "a breach of peace." The Atlanta Constitution, on May 15, 1991, reported that a shoe salesman had been arrested in Clayton County for violation of this law. A customer, accompanied by her fifteen-month-old daughter, went to a shoe store in Riverdale to return a pair of shoes she had previously purchased. When the sales clerk told her she would need to come back later since he had insufficient cash on hand to give her a refund, she complained about the inconvenience. According to the newspaper report, the sales clerk responded by shrugging his shoulders and saying, "Lady, sh-- happens." The offended customer went to the police and signed a criminal warrant, resulting in the arrest of

the clerk. The maximum penalty he faced was a fine of $1,000 and a year in prison, but he was spared the penalty when the charge was subsequently dropped. Apparently the law is far from dormant, however; the news item states that it is not unusual for solicitors in the Metropolitan Atlanta area to use it "a couple of times a year," usually when someone is offended by being called "an obscene name."

The Victorian concern over vulgar, indecent, and obscene language apparently did not extend to uncomplimentary names for members of ethnic groups. Terms of opprobrium have probably been in use as long as groups of people have seen other groups as being different from themselves, and the tendency to use them seems to be as well established as the tendency to swear. Apparently, such terms were used rather freely in the nineteenth century, and in fact some that have had wide currency since then found their way into the English language during that period.

Frog, referring to a Frenchman, came into use in England about 1870, according to Partridge (1961, p. 303). Wop is traced

by Mencken (1963, p. 372) to guappo, a Neapolitan term denoting a showy, pretentious fellow; Italian immigrants brought the latter term with them to America about 1885, and within a decade wop came to signify an Italian. Dago, from Diego, was first used in the 1830s to designate a Spaniard. It was probably transferred to Italians in the 1880s. Greaser as a term for Mexicans and other Spanish Americans became common during the war with Mexico. Mencken (p. 374) cites an early example of its use in a letter written in Texas in 1836. Wetback, suggesting the illegal method of entry of some Mexican immigrants, is of more recent origin. Irish as a derogatory prefix was used in England as early as the seventeenth century, and subsequently in the United States. Mencken cites the following compounds from the nineteenth century; Irish dividend, an assessment on stock, 1881; Irish spoon, a spade, 1862; and Irish pennant, a loose end of rope, 1840. "In the days of the great Irish immigration," says Mencken, "the American designation of almost anything unpleasant was hung with the adjective and it was converted into

a noun to signify a quick temper" (p. 372). Both the Irish and the Germans, often referred to as Dutch (Deutsch), are viewed negatively in the following folk rhyme quoted by Rawson (1989, p. 210):

> The dirty, dirty Dutch
> They don't amount to much
> But they're a damned sight better than the Irish.

Both Irish and Dutch can now be used without offense.

Jew as a synonym for usurer goes back at least to the early seventeenth century. Its conversion into a verb seems to have occurred in America in the early nineteenth century. Rawson says, "A curious effect of the long and largely successful campaign of Jews in the first half of the (twentieth) century to eliminate the use of Jew as a verb was that many people, including numerous Jews, started to avoid using the word in any sense at all" (p. 220). Mencken, writing prior to World War II, said: "Certain American Jews carry on a continuous campaign against the use of Jew, and American newspapers, in order to get

rid of their clamor, often use Hebrew instead. The very word Jew appears to be offensive to American Jews, and they commonly avoid it by using Jewish with a noun" (p. 377). Rawson notes that the word Jew is no longer shunned to the degree it formerly was, "But even so, careful speakers are more likely to say "He is Jewish' than "He is a Jew' (p. 220).

The appropriate word for designating people of African descent has long been the subject of disagreement, and many of the words that have been used have at one time or another had negative connotations. Mencken cites an article on this subject which appeared in the May 1937 issue of Opportunity, the organ of the National Urban League. The article, written by Dean Kelly Miller of Howard University, traced the history of common American designations of persons of Miller's race. Mencken's summary is as follows:

> In the first days of slavery, they were called blacks, and even after interbreeding lightened their color the term continued in use. Then came African, which was accepted by the race "in the early years, after it first came to self-

> consciousness," and still survives in the titles of some of its religious organizations....A bit later darky or darkey began to be used and "at first carried no invidious implication." Then came Africo-American (1835 or thereabout), but it was too clumsy to be adopted. After the Civil War the wartime coinage freedman was in wide use, but it began to die out before the 70's. In 1880...Afro-American was invented by T. Thomas Fortune, editor of the New York Age...At some undetermined time after 1900, Sir Harry Johnston, the English African explorer and colonial administrator, shortened Afro-American to Aframerican, but the latter has had little vogue. (pp. 380-381)

Negro, from Latin niger, is the Spanish and Portugese word for black; it was borrowed by the English during the sixteenth century. Mencken notes that one objection to its use was that it frequently was pronounced as nigger, a word that came to be bitterly resented by persons so designated. The Oxford English Dictionary's earliest example of nigger comes from a poem by Robert Burns published in 1786. The Dictionary of American English traces nigger boy to 1825 and nigger talk to 1866. Rawson notes that in its early use nigger was not necessarily

pejorative, and in fact was sometimes used without contempt well into the twentieth century. Hayakawa (1940) relates an account of a distinguished Negro sociologist who in his adolescence was hitchhiking in an area where Negroes were seldom seen. He was befriended by a kindly white couple who gave him food and a place to sleep in their home. He was grateful for their kindness, but he was profoundly upset by the fact that they kept calling him "little nigger." He finally got up courage enough to ask the man not to call him by that "insulting" name. Hayakawa gives the ensuing dialogue:

"Who's insultin' you, son?"

"You are, sir--that name you're always calling me."

"I ain't callin' you no names, son."

"I mean your calling me "nigger.'"

"Well, what's insultin' about that? You are a nigger, ain't you?" (p. 90)

Resistance to the hated word intensified during the 1930s. When Agatha Christie's 1939 play Ten Little Niggers was published

in the United States, it had to be retitled Ten Little Indians (it was later changed to Then There Were None). Racial integration in the 1950s and 60s intensified concern over appropriate ways to designate ethnic origin, a concern which continues to manifest itself in various ways.

The Atlanta Constitution on May 3, 1991, reported that the play Coup/Clucks, by Kentucky writer Jane Martin, had opened the previous week in Gainesville, Georgia and was drawing fire both from members of the black community and from members of the Klu Klux Klan. Black critics had complained about the use of derogatory terms for blacks in the dialogue. On the other hand, a black actor in the play stated that it accurately portrays racism and the Klan, and that it is "not so much anti-black or anti-white as anti-bigotry." The business manager of the Theatre Alliance said the play "addresses racism and bigotry head-on. It makes a statement through comedy and laughter." But the humor was obviously lost on some black citizens and Klan members alike. A Gainesville NAACP official was quoted as saying: "I really

didn't appreciate it, and I didn't find it funny...." Klan members reacted by carrying signs on opening night with this message: "This play contains profanity and sexual suggestions."

In the latter half of the twentieth century, as the American public in general has become decreasingly sensitive about the use of profane, obscene and vulgar language, there has been a growing sensitivity to the need to avoid potentially offensive words referring to all kinds of minority groups. Evidence of this sensitivity is widespread. A news item in the Atlanta Constitution on July 14, 1991 reported that a man in Hollywood, Florida was sentenced to serve three months in federal prison and three years on probation for shouting racial slurs and making threats to keep a black woman from moving into the neighborhood. The man was also ordered to perform 100 hours of community service. The Las Vegas Review Journal on May 11, 1991, carried an editorial comment on the report that a U.S. Immigration and Naturalization official in Miami had earlier that week met with a group of twenty angry Chinese-Americans to apologize for using

the word Chinaman in reference to Chinese detainees. As a gesture of conciliation the official agreed to hire three Chinese interpreters for an INS camp near Miami and to name a liaison to speed the release of Chinese refugees. The opening sentence of the item was: "Credit the Politically Correct with securing booty as a result of their self-righteous attacks," a statement which reflects a growing counter-sensitivity.

The Atlanta Constitution on January 14, 1991 reported that Fulton County education officials had drafted a proposed anti-bigotry policy that prohibits racial, ethnic, religious or gender-related slurs that "tend to provoke violent resentment." One official indicated that the proposed policy was aimed more at adult visitors than at students. The proposed policy is reported to be similar to policies in other school systems across the country, including some in Michigan, Ohio, Colorado, Maryland, and the state of Washington. Without listing specific words or acts, the proposed Fulton policy refers to "fighting words" that are abusive and provoke resentment. The policy statement echoes

a state law that, without referring to bigotry, makes the use of "fighting words" a misdemeanor. Students who violated the policy would be subject to "appropriate disciplinary action" that could include suspension from school. Visitors who violated the policy would be asked to leave and would be subject to arrest if they did not comply.

The same news article reports the implementation of a policy in Tacoma, Washington schools against derogatory remarks, acts, pictures, and gestures. The policy, in effect since 1986, was recently amended to include jokes referring to any ethnic, racial or sexual group. The article goes on to report that a black teacher in Tacoma was recently given a verbal reprimand for violating the policy. Her offense was that of commenting to her class that black students have to work twice as hard to succeed because "it's a white world run by blue-eyed people." The white students in the class took offense, although the teacher reportedly did not mean to be derogatory.

An item in the January 11 issue of the same paper reported that the proposed policy was unanimously adopted by the Fulton County Board. It also stated that Emory University has had a similar policy in effect since 1988. In the January 14 issue, a Constitution editorial writer refers approvingly to the Fulton County Board's action. He begins his column by saying, "A lot of folks are starting to get sensitive about sensitivity," and he refers to complaints about the "sensitivity police" on the prowl these days, "making sure that only politically correct thought is given voice." He notes the argument that this is the new censorship, which stifles debate and leaves no room for disagreement about the accepted party line. He cites several examples of what he regards as examples of "over sensitivity" reactions, and says, "I think sensitivity to the feelings of others is a good thing, and I believe there are circumstances when it should not only be encouraged but mandated." He concludes by saying, "The (Fulton County) policy doesn't require that people not be bigots. It does require that while on school

property they at least be civil about it. In the school setting, that level of sensitivity is, I think, quite appropriate."

Many public figures who were not "appropriately sensitive" have found themselves the objects of wrath when they have carelessly, and possibly unwittingly, used recently proscribed words. Their reaction to the pressure to use politically correct language is reflected in President Bush's 1991 commencement address at the University of Michigan. A May 4 New York Times news release reported that the President attacked what he called the notion of "political correctness," saying it had led to "inquisition," "censorship," and "bullying" on some college campuses. The news report identified the speech as part of a growing political backlash against the idea that free speech should be subordinated to the civil rights of women and members of minority groups. "Ironically," the President said, "on the 200th anniversary of the Bill of Rights, we find free speech under assault throughout the United States, including on some college campuses."

Gary Trudeau in his "Doonesbury" comic strip for May 19, 1991, satirized the "new appropriateness" in language on college campuses. He portrays a commencement speaker delivering an address with the following complete text:

> Graduating seniors, parents and friends--Let me begin by reassuring you that my remarks today will stand up to the most stringent requirements of the new appropriateness. The intra-college sensitivity advisory committee has vetted the text of even trace amounts of subconscious racism, sexism, and classism. Moreover, a faculty panel of deconstructionists have reconfigured the rhetorical components within a post-structuralist framework, so as to expunge any offensive elements of Western rationalism and linear logic. Finally, all references flowing from a white male, Eurocentric perspective have been eliminated, as have any other ruminations deemed denigrating to the political consensus of the moment. Thank you and good luck.

The efforts of advocates of politically correct language demonstrate that people with liberal leanings may have as much interest in restricting language use under certain circumstances as do those of a more conservative persuasion. Part of the difference between them lies in what they think needs to be

restricted. Their efforts probably also lend support to the conclusion that some sort of restriction on language in any society is inevitable. What must be guarded against is any sort of restriction that will interfere with the freedom of expression and the free flow of ideas that are essential to the health, and indeed the continuing existence, of a democratic society. We must somehow maintain a balance between necessary restrictions and freedom.

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